

Title: Extreme dance: with contemporary beginning to look quaint, choreographers today are pushing the boundaries of performance

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The dancer was astonishing, bold with his movements, an assertive theatrical presence. Part of an ensemble of maverick men, all members of Belgium's acclaimed Ultima Vez, Sad Gharbi threw himself into the structured chaos at the core of *Wishing and Wanting*, a full-length show that played Toronto's Premiere Dance Theatre in the fall. I reviewed the show, and as is my practice, did not read the press kit until after my critique was written. Imagine my astonishment when I then learned that the dancer I had admired was blind. So my instincts were right. Gharbi was a trailblazer -- but in a far more radical way than I could have imagined.

Choreographer Wim Vandekeybus had not drawn attention to his dancer's lack of sight. So unless you had prior information, there was no way of singling Gharbi out as in any way less capable than his colleagues in creating a visceral work of art. It's a growing trend in dance, turning what many might consider limitations into startling new points of departure for creative exploration.

More and more dancemakers working today are moving in this direction. Ann Cooper Albright, who identifies and tracks the phenomenon in her 1997 book, *Choreographing Difference*, says it stems from a growing desire in dance to push back the edges of theatrical realism. Using the hypermuscular, vertically jet-propelled body of Montreal's Louise Lecavalier, former lead dancer of La La La Human Steps, as a prime example, Cooper shows that idealized images of the body are increasingly being replaced with new models of what is dance and what is a dancer.

Contemporary dance, which has been about bucking the mainstream ever since

Isadora Duncan decided to go barefoot when ballet and restrictive pointe shoes were all the rage in early 20th-century Europe, has now increased investigations into the avant-garde by employing people who openly defy expectations.

The more radical choreographers working today, among them New York's Bill T. Jones and England's DV8 Physical Theatre are creating dances for people in wheelchairs and with cerebral palsy, with AIDS and obesity. These aren't freak shows. The new choreography is exploring alternate ways of moving and so also features able-bodied performers who are risk-takers in their own right -- rock climbers, for instance, who incorporate structured, rhythmic movement into their gravity-defying aerial moves. Debra Brown, the choreographer who creates the marvellous movement spectacles for Montreal-based Cirque du Soleil, once performed a dance on a trampoline. Apogee, which toured across Canada, literally catapulted dance way beyond the mainstream -- and almost out the theatre.

Dance is trying to regain originality at a time when innovations in technologies such as film and video, have made it look outmoded, quaint, irrelevant, by comparison.

"I think what's been happening in dance is that it has allowed itself to become mired in style," said choreographer Miriam Rother from her home outside Geneva. A Canadian who has lived in Europe for more than 30 years, Rother works frequently with disabled people in creating dance pieces that defy predictability.

"There is so much style today, even if it's postmodern," she continued. "After a while the traditional styles no longer express an idea. They express only themselves. I guess I'm still looking to express something through pure movement, because traditional styles have become hackneyed. They've become over-used."

Rother worked last year with a motley crew of blind, palsied and wheelchair-bound performers in Toronto for a performance piece entitled E.merge(ncy), about transcending limitations. Showcased at the Summerworks arts festival, and critically well received, the full-length work was performed by artists who, for various reasons, no longer had full control over their bodies.

Rose Jacobson, cross-cultural director of the Toronto Theatre Alliance, had brought the group together because she wanted to give expression to what she refers to as the subculture of disability. "My thrust has always been art-driven," Jacobson recently said. "I have always had the belief that different physical abilities can enhance any artistic creation. And artists with disabilities should have the full range of possibilities as the rest of us to create and perform in public."

Spirit Synott, one of the performers in E.merge(ncy), was born with spina bifida. She walked until she was 17, not gracefully mind you. "I was like a wounded, bow-legged cowboy," said the blond part-time model with a laugh. "But one of my friends said I had an illegal wiggle. And I liked that."

Now 36, she has been in a wheelchair for nearly half her life. She dances in it -- at clubs, on stages, and recently at the downtown studios of Toronto choreographer Debbie Wilson. Synott's mother, Isabel, was a dance teacher and taught tap and jazz and acrobatics to five of her six children. Spirit was excluded; ironically, she is the only one in the family still dancing. "I was dancing before the womb."

The attraction is the same for most dancers: "It's enlightening and invigorating." Synott acknowledges that being disabled adds "a little bit of mystery to me."

"People have a very narrow view of what people who have disabilities are capable of doing. I think all bodies should be given an opportunity to experience movement in the form of dance. It's primal. It's been performed long before it was even named dance. It shouldn't be limited to the highly defined, complicated posturings of able-bodied persons. You can dance with your eyes, if given the chance."

Jillian Stuart, of Victoria, B.C., knows exactly what Synott's talking about. For many years she also has been confined to a chair, the worn chair in her living room where she sat feeling depressed and dejected about her size. Stuart, at 250 pounds, is fat. It isn't something she can change. Her mother is large and so are her siblings. Her daughter is promising to be a chip off the old block. At 13, she is already 130 pounds. But they laugh when describing their size. Their newfound levity comes courtesy of dance, which Stuart discovered on the recommendation of her doctor. "He wrote me a prescription for Big Dance," Stuart said. "And off I went, and it changed my life."

Big Dance is the brainchild of Lynda Raino, a choreographer and dance teacher on the West Coast who founded a troupe for oversized women nine years ago. "I had a large woman tell me that if I ever organized a class for big people she would come because she would never put herself in a class of regular-sized bodies. I thought it was a good idea. But never did I believe that Big Dance would become a symbol of the empowerment of the oppressed. For that indeed is what it has become."

The average weight of the five dancers currently in the show is 250 pounds. These are big mamas, in more ways than one. Their size matches their enthusiasm. Big Dance, a documentary about the troupe directed by Sherry Antonishen, shows Rubenesque bodies luxuriating in movement fresh in style and content (the film is distributed through Kinetic Video in Toronto, 1-800-263-6910). The women have a gracefulness and pliability that may surprise those who equate fat with ugly. And many in our society do.

"It takes people's perceptions away from the idea that if you're fat you're a couch potato and you're lazy," said Stuart. "Because when we are dancing on a stage in front of an audience we're not lazy, we're not couch potatoes. We are dancers. And we are beautiful."

Stuart's transformative experience with Big Dance has led her to leave Raino to study voice and a new form of movement, just being pioneered on the West Coast, called water dance. Ana McGregor is teaching 10 or so would-be dancers in a pool in Victoria. The objective is increased buoyancy of movement, one of dance's elusive ideals. In San Francisco, a synchronized swim troupe of big women called The Padded Lilies have as their motto: "Changing the world and wearing bikinis!"

Another much sought after quality in dance is the ability to seem as if floating on air. Pointe shoes, elevated jumps and sustained leaps are part of a technique developed over the centuries by ballet to make dancers look as if they were capable of defeating gravity. It's a difficult, if not impossible, goal. But recently a group of mountain climbers, working with dance, have been able to master that airy illusion.

Calling their Toronto-based company HiXposure, Peter Penev and climbing partner Aina Tilups have introduced to dance the cliff-hanging risk and danger associated with their sport. Their ensemble has scaled bridges and theatre balconies in pursuit of a novel way of performing that uses contact improvisation as part of its no-holds-barred technique. Their shows are about confronting and transcending barriers, even psychological ones. "If you can imagine yourself at the bottom of a rock face," said Penev, a psychiatrist by profession, "and one part of you knows that there's a safety net but the other part knows that there's always a chance you'd fall through. You're in a unique position. You're confronting fear and danger. You're facing a little death. And there's always the big doubt -- can I do this? And when you can, you get such a rush. That's what makes it all so addictive."

That adrenaline high, so engaging when applied to dance, is what makes HiXposure so thrilling to watch. There's no formula, no set plan. Everything is literally set to freefall.

This is one reason why Pam Johnson, who has trained in all the traditional styles, has replaced her dance shoes with a harness and rope.

"I saw a tremendous new possibility for movement off the ground," Johnson said.

"You are literally going up and up. You are moving not just away from the watcher, you are entering a whole new world of performance. There is risk in that. But it is all worth it, because it means that boundaries are blurred. There's an ever-expanding definition of what dance is."

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